

Abstract: This article examines the representation of waste and re-use in a selection of 'mad housewife' novels of the late 1960s and 1970s in an effort to redress feminist critics' assessments of the genre as historically important but of dubious literary worth. Focussing on Anne Richardson Roiphe's *Up the Sandbox!*, Sheila Ballantyne's *Norma Jean the Termite Queen*, and Alix Kates Schulman's *Memoirs of an Ex Prom-Queen*, I argue that the novels in this genre enact their protagonists' departure from convention through the adoption of a fluid, collagistic structure that moves between temporal modes, narrative perspectives, and reality and fantasy, and through their incorporation of a range of external media (newspaper excerpts, recipes, advertising slogans) that 'mess up' the tidy structure of the popular realist novels that they seem, at first glance, to emulate. In their relentless attention to literal and figurative waste matter, and through the use of literary devices that defeat the attempt to bind the story within a linear narrative, Roiphe, Ballantyne, and Schulman create a carnivalesque disorder of both their protagonists' homes and the novel form. In examining these ideas, I seek to complicate existing accounts of waste in literature and 1960s and 70s countercultural writing, both of which remain heavily focused on writing by male authors.

Keywords: waste, feminist criticism, 1960s, 19670s, housework, literary realism, collage

'The house was a garbage dump':¹

Waste, mess and aesthetic reclamation in 1960s and 70s 'mad housewife' fiction

Dr Rachele Dini, Department of English and Creative Writing, University of Roehampton

In Sue Kaufman's *Diary of a Mad Housewife* (1967), narrator Tina Balser is kept awake at night by visions of 'burnt-out light bulbs, cracked cups' and 'a toaster with a dangerously frayed cord,' all of which remind her that she has 'let this place [the house] go.'² To counter these waking nightmares, Tina soothes herself with a fantasy in which she features as 'a model of efficiency' who presides over a home in which 'everything is in its place' (*DOAMH*, 67). To the 'parade of objects' in disarray, this 'paragon-housekeeper' opposes 'stacks of un-cracked plates, and scores of cups hanging from unbroken handles' until 'a delicious calm comes over me' (*DOAMH*, 67).

Albeit indebted to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper' (1892), *Diary of a Mad Housewife* is widely regarded as having pioneered a new genre of US popular fiction for women that, from the late 1960s to the end of the 1970s, channeled the ideas of second-wave feminism to articulate what Betty Friedan termed 'the problem that has no name.'³ The 'mad housewife' novel, as Imelda Whelehan calls it, sought to give voice to the 'anguished sense of entrapment' of a generation of white middle-class American housewives.⁴ Due to their explicit political themes and their authors' often direct involvement with the women's liberation movement,⁵ such texts have played a prominent role in recent historical accounts of second-wave feminism⁶ and in feminist cultural studies more broadly.⁷ Within these fields, texts such as Alix Kates Schulman's *Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen* (1969), Anne Richardson Roiphe's *Up the Sandbox!* (1970), Sheila Ballantyne's *Norma Jean the Termite Queen* (1975), Marilyn French's *The Women's Room* (1977) and Joyce Rebeta-Burditt's *The Cracker Factory* (1977) have been reclaimed from obscurity as important cultural artefacts of second-wave feminism's popularization and incorporated into broader discussions about the movement's erasure of race, class and ethnic differences (Loudmilk, 10; Whelehan, 18).⁸ These efforts at reclamation however have usually been accompanied by explicit qualifiers regarding the novels' (purportedly) poor literary value: thus Whelehan opines that 'none of these confessional novels possess any enduring literary or other worth and in any case a form too often exploited rapidly becomes tired' (66), while Maroula Joannou states that they 'may appear lacking in subtlety, formally conservative, and sometimes even hectoring in tone.'⁹ These assessments are in keeping with a broader tendency, first identified by Rita Felski in the late 1980s, to omit experimental fiction from feminist literary studies of the 1960s and 1970s (29). This article seeks to rectify this omission, and to argue against the categorization of mad housewife fiction as a realist genre 'strikingly at odds' with 1960s and 70s experimental fiction (Whelehan, 65) and distinct from the 'postmodernist metafiction by male writers such as Thomas Pynchon, Kurt Vonnegut, and Norman Mailer' (Loudermilk, 34). My contention instead is that several of these texts—most notably, *Up the Sandbox!*, *Norma Jean the Termite Queen*, and *Memoirs of an Ex Prom-Queen*—are in fact remarkable works of aesthetic experimentation that enact their protagonists' departure from convention at the level of form. They do this through the adoption of a noticeably non-linear and for the most part plot-less narrative structure involving abrupt alternations between

temporal modes, narrative perspectives, and everyday life and fantasy, and through the incorporation of a range of external media including extracts of recipes, news articles, advice columns, and advertisements.¹⁰ I argue that this latter strategy transforms the novels themselves into textual equivalents of the disordered spaces their protagonists seek to organize. In *Up the Sandbox!*, Margaret Reynolds alternates between chapters enumerating her everyday failures at housekeeping and chapters in which she ‘assume[s] a counter-personality’ (*UTS*, 26) who joins in Civil Rights activism, travels to Vietnam to protest the war, and has sex with Fidel Castro (who turns out to be a woman), while her husband looks after house and children (*UTS*, 88). The frequent slip into stream of consciousness narration in the ‘everyday’ chapters however renders these as disorientating as the ‘fantasy’ ones. In *Norma Jean the Termite Queen*, sculptor-turned-housewife Norma Jean concedes that her husband probably ‘regrets not having consulted *Consumer Reports* before marrying [her]’ (*NJTTQ*, 128), and consoles herself by poring over newspaper headlines about women killed by their dishwashers (30) and human heads found in garbage cans (*NJTTQ*, 189). These textual fragments are interspersed throughout the text, interrupting any semblance of linearity. In *Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen*, narrator Sasha is plagued by disgust regarding her excreting body: ruminations over leaking tampons and parasitic foetuses intercut with recipes and advertising jingles structure the novel from start to end. Finally in *The Women’s Room*, ‘shit and string beans’ is shorthand for the trivial pursuits that clutter the lives of narrator Mira’s female contemporaries and which they seek to escape, but which, she emphasises, also ‘constitute the very essence of life’ (*WR*, 46).

My contention, then, is that in their examination of literal and figurative waste matter, and through the use of literary devices that defeat the attempt to bind the story within a linear narrative, Roiphe, Ballantyne, and Schulman create a carnivalesque disorder both of their protagonists’ homes, and of the novel form. In their discussions of waste, their undermining of the idealized postwar image of the patriotic housewife, their subversion of the experimental practices of Surrealism, and Dada, and their ridiculing of pop art, these novels complicate existing accounts of both waste literature¹¹ and 1960s and 70s countercultural writing, both of which remain heavily focused on writing by male authors.¹² Finally, the achievement of mainstream popularity by texts that make profligate use of formal devices more frequently associated with experimental writing undermines simplistic binaries such as avant-

garde/mainstream, or radical/bourgeois. The style, form, and thematic concerns of these novels thus mark them out as distinctly ‘other’ to both a male-dominated counterculture and the realism of other popular women’s fiction of the period. By examining these different forms of reclamation, I thus seek to reclaim the texts themselves as remarkable literary works in their own right, to open up a wider debate around the definition of countercultural writing, and to rectify the male-centric focus of literary critiques of waste in literature.¹³ I would further contend that the valuation of postmodernist metafiction by male writers as formally superior to the so-called ‘confessional mode’ of their female contemporaries hinges on an implicit valuation of certain waste forms as superior to others. Put bluntly, it would seem that the byproducts of capitalist production, consumption, and war are more worthy of focus than shitty diapers, blocked garbage disposal units, ageing female bodies, or their excretions. That hierarchy warrants challenging.

Waste, reclamation, and the avant-garde

As I have written elsewhere, the reclamation of waste formed a central part of the radical aesthetic movements of the early twentieth century, as exemplified by the incorporation of newspaper fragments and other remnants into the Cubist, Dadaists and Surrealist works of artists including Picasso, Kurt Schwitters, and Marcel Duchamp, where they served to both defy aesthetic tradition and denounce the commodification of art (Dini, 33 and 48-49).¹⁴ The influence of collage and its three-dimensional counterpart, assemblage, was far-reaching, manifesting itself, within Anglo-American and European fiction, in the use of literary montage and non-linear plots as well as in a newly pronounced focus, within the narratives themselves, on scavenged materials (Dini, 33-35). By the late 1950s and early 1960s this influence was evident in a range of countercultural aesthetic movements that sought to call into question the era’s conflation of consumer choice with democratic freedom and what Mark Gottdeiner has described as the association of consumer goods with ‘a sense of [...] effortless ease, technological mastery, [and] modernity.’¹⁵ Such manifestations of dissent included the ‘junk art’ art of American pop artists such as Claes Oldenburg, Robert Rauschenberg, and Jim Dine,¹⁶ whose focus on effluvia in turn influenced the writing of Donald Barthelme, William Burroughs, Frank O’Hara, and William Gaddis (Cran, 85-134; Dini, 99-138), the animation techniques of Stan Vanderbeek, Harry

Smith and Larry Jordan, and the cinematic work of Arthur Lipsett.¹⁷ ‘Junk art’ gained particular prominence in New York—the homes of all of the authors of ‘mad housewife’ novels mentioned above—following the Museum of Modern Art’s 1961 exhibition, *The Art of the Assemblage*, where the new junk artists’ work was presented alongside that of their Dada and Surrealist forebears (Whiteley, 45), and which *Time* picked up on in its May 1962 feature on American pop art. Meanwhile on the West Coast, where *Norma Jean the Termite Queen* is set, waste formed a focal point for the California assemblage movement—a group of artists that including Jeremy Anderson and Art Grant that emerged in the late 1950s, and whose work salvaged consumer waste in ways that ‘connected the surrealist strains of the late 1940s with 1960s Pop and Funk’ (Whiteley, 57).¹⁸ Throughout the 1960s and early 70s, experimental visual artists and writers similarly deployed waste to call into question racial inequality (Noah Purifoy), gender inequality (Carolee Schneeman) and the alienating effects of an increasingly consumer goods-driven culture obsessed with cleanliness.¹⁹

The ‘mad housewife’ novels respond to these ideas through attention to discarded materials and dirt, through formal strategies that replicate the methods of their visual collage artist contemporaries, and through explicit discussions about modern art that reflect back on the condition of the homemaker. These texts understand dirt to be both ‘matter out of out place,’ as Mary Douglas defined it in her structuralist anthropological study, *Purity and Danger* (1966),²⁰ and matter that marks time, as Simone de Beauvoir described it in *The Second Sex* (1949)—matter whose expulsion is only temporary, its vanquishing impossible.²¹ As numerous scholars have noted, the emergence of commercial household cleaning products and domestic appliances at the beginning of the twentieth century coincided with the rise of modern advertising. For the housewife to be ‘never done’ cleaning, and to always require new implements to help her, was precisely the industry’s aim.²² By the same token however this pursuit of dirt was also the ultimate futile effort. The waste matter in these texts in turn is, as I have defined it elsewhere, ‘matter out of time’—a residue of a defunct process, a sign of obsolescence (Dini, 5)—whose nausea-inducing qualities also recall Julia Kristeva’s definition of the ‘abject’: matter that ‘beseeches and pulverizes’ the subject or system from which it has been expelled, threatening the very body from which it emerged.²³

The texts under discussion mobilise dirt's resistance to removal and waste's discomfiting qualities to challenge traditional gender roles, while the excretions of the female body, traditionally the cause of shame, are placed at the forefront of the narrative and posited as worthy of attention. This salvaging ethos is in turn enacted through the novels' profligate reclamation of textual fragments that recalls the collage practices of the avant-garde, but that could equally be likened to the principles of 'femmage.' This was a term coined by feminist visual artists Melissa Meyer and Miriam Schapiro in the late 1970s for collage works made by and about women, which they argued differed from those of the male-dominated avant-garde both in their methods and in their underlying intent. In their much-anthologised essay, 'Waste not, Want not' (1978), Schapiro and Meyer argued that women both in and outside of the West had been practicing collage techniques long before Picasso and Duchamp made the term a household name.²⁴ To qualify as a 'femmage,' they argued, a work must match seven of fourteen criteria, including: be made by a woman, involve saving and collecting, privilege the recycling of scraps, bear a theme relating to the lives of women, feature covert imagery, have a diarist's point of view, and include photographs or other printed matter. While the novels under discussion predate this essay, Schapiro and Meyer's ideas provide a valuable way into thinking about the inherent feminism in the novels' different engagements with cast-offs.

'[T]hings in disorder I can't really control'²⁵: Redemption through collage narrative

Perhaps unsurprisingly given their middleclass status and university education, the protagonists of the novels under discussion are fluent in the language of art criticism. Schulman's Sasha studied art history and philosophy and Ballantyne's Norm Jean was once a successful sculptor, while the cast of Harvard PhD students in Marilyn French's text view the principles of Cubism as an apt model for an egalitarian society—"There is no single thing in a cubist painting that dominates the whole, yet the whole coheres" (TWR, 340).

This engagement with twentieth-century experimental art is made still more explicit in *Up the Sandbox!* One of the novel's 'everyday' chapters in fact opens with a shopping list for 'Soap, Ivory 3 bars, Ajax, Mr. Clean, Animal crackers [...] 2 jars

strained peas [...] Brillo pads [...] Mr. Bubble Bath' (UTS, 99). This is immediately followed by Margaret's enthusiastic proclamation:

I love pop art. I regret its fading from the scene. How perfect it was to be recognised and appreciated by the artists. Like a nun in medieval France, there was a while when I felt my interior world represented in the museums and all the proper public places. People laughed, not seeing that pop art is the perfect legitimization of life itself, a landscape art of the contemporary scene, a glorification of the inner mind, a portrait of the soul. What else should art be about? (UTS, 100).

The abrupt transition from the shopping list to the discussion of pop art appears, here, to have been catalysed by one of the items Margaret has written down: Brillo pads. These, one might deduce, have reminded her of Andy Warhol's 1964 installation, *Brillo Box (Soap Pads)*—a work that transformed a seemingly mundane household object used by housewives day in and day out into an icon of post-war culture.²⁶

The analysis of pop art as a 'portrait of the soul' offers multiple readings. From one perspective it is tongue-in-cheek, like that in *The Women's Room*, where two of the female protagonists make fun of a male friend for viewing a stack of soup cans in the kitchen as "homemade pop art" capable of shedding insight into "the deep, mystic heart of things" (WR, 335). The man playfully retorts that the soup cans emanate a 'thunderous cry' in the style of Norman Mailer's *Why Are We in Vietnam?* (WR, 335). French's passage highlights the distance between a male canon and a marginalised feminine everyday, while parodying the ways in which television and print media coverage of the Vietnam War itself was wedged in amongst advertisements for household goods and coverage of the pop art movement. Indeed, one has only to leaf through issues of *Life* or *Time* magazine from this period to gain a sense of the mediated reality to which both Roiphe and French's texts respond. A stack of soup cans mimicking Norman Mailer's anger at the Vietnam War arguably pales in comparison to an ad for Wonder Bread, inciting mothers to 'Make the Most of Their [children's] Wonder Years,' flanked by photographs of Vietnamese civilians running for their lives.²⁷ Roiphe's text can similarly be seen to make fun of both a male-dominated art scene's sudden fetish for the housewife's accoutrements, and the

public reception of the movement itself. In particular, the *tone* of Margaret's celebration of pop art in this passage ironically echoes the media's sycophantic coverage of the movement in the late 1960s, which largely downplayed or outright ignored its political dimension, presenting it instead as a 'far-out' fad being mined by the very manufacturers its practitioners were critiquing.²⁸ While Campbell's launched a range of soup-themed merchandise inspired by Warhol's *Soup Cans* (1962), supported by a high-profile print campaign in all of the major magazines, *Life* reported on refrigerator manufacturer Kelvinator's new line of 'pop art refrigerators' retailing for '50% to 100% more than standard models' as part of the brand's 'push to make the U.S. a nation of two-refrigerator families.'²⁹ Another article, in the July 16 1965 issue of *Life*, focused on the delight of a millionaire and his wife with their new collection of pop art, and particularly their acquisition of Claes Oldenberg's *Stove* (1962), an installation composed of a real stove 'decorated' with assorted meats made of muslin and burlap soaked in plaster.³⁰ According to the work's new owner: "It's a ball living with pop art [...] It's great to wake up and see it [...] My wife thought I was crazy when the stove arrived [...] but now she calls it 'my emerald'" (56). Margaret's rhapsody ironically mimics the uncritical tone of such responses to the movement, wherein the tools of domestic labour become collectable items, housework a spectacle for the viewing pleasure of those who will never have to do it.³¹ The 'regret' at pop art's 'fading from the scene' in this context sarcastically hints at another absence: the housewife excised from these representations, and who was never considered part of 'the scene' to begin with.

As well as a pointed critique, however, Margaret's meditation can be understood as a self-reflexive comment on the shopping list that preceded it, and to instruct the reader to approach it as a work of art. Replicated within the space of the novel and followed by a discussion of the realism conveyed by everyday items, the list is transformed from a mere participant in daily chores to be thrown away once it has been used into a component in a portrait of the housewife's daily life. Her analysis of pop art in turn alerts the reader to the significance of the everyday fragments incorporated in her own narrative, forming part of a broader process of reclamation.

The importance of Margaret's shopping list becomes especially significant when one considers the pages immediately following. Here she reflects on her husband's contention that they will not 'give up [their] souls for cars and color television' (a statement that uncannily echoes the most frequent criticism of pop art and Warhol in

particular as being in thrall to consumerism). She then contemplates her love of luxury clothing, her shame regarding her 'middle-classness' ('I must content myself with Jell-O chocolate pudding for dessert, not mousse, and remember my station'), her embarrassment when her mother sent over a maid since she couldn't handle the housework, and, finally, the fact that she cannot hire the maid permanently, since having someone else do the housework would be exploitative (*UTS*, 100-102).

Feminist literature scholars following Lisa Maria Hogeland have tended to read the intimate tone and focus on everyday life of passages such as this as 'extensions' of the consciousness-raising practices of second-wave feminism, which relied on the 'testimony that women provided in [...] face-to-face group meetings'.³² This approach however risks obscuring their formal ingenuity. Following each other in such quick succession, Margaret's disparate thought-fragments bring together a whole host of class and gender anxieties centred around the home that in turn shed light on the seemingly meaningless, and more or less unsavoury, items in the shopping list at the chapter's outset. Through these different accounts of the aesthetic value of the products lining grocery store shelves, and the moral pitfalls of either consuming too much, not consuming the right things, living in mess, or paying someone to clean up your mess, Margaret surreptitiously imbues each of the items in her list with new meaning. The jars of strained foods form part of the shameful reflection on her social status. Meanwhile the Brillo pads may be worthy of exhibiting at the Museum of Modern Art, but they are also symbolic of the contentious question of who should be doing the cleaning, and why it is considered exploitative to hire someone to clean, but not exploitative to expect one's wife to do it for free—a question that was at the heart of Marxist feminist debates in the late 1960s and early 1970s, themselves influenced by Nixon and Khrushchev's discussions about housework during the 1959 Kitchen Debate, and which the text's frequent references to socialism implicitly reference.³³

In this way, Roiphe incorporates an explicit discussion of what constitutes art into a narrative that itself defies narrative convention while revealing the socio-political charge of seemingly everyday objects and throwaway texts. The surrealistic quality of her thoughts as she moves from one worry to another in turn renders the everyday itself strange: where it is the subject of the 'daydream chapters' that renders them inherently fantastical, it is the narrative *form* of this 'ordinary chapter' that transforms the ephemera of everyday life into something startling.

Ballantyne's *Norma Jean the Termite Queen* similarly makes liberal use of montage and fragments in its meditations on waste in ways that have gone largely unrecognized beyond Greene's excellent analysis (82-83). Ballantyne introduces Norma Jean in the midst of one of her frequent daydreams: in this case, she is testifying against her husband and children for the 'unwarranted claims they make on [her] mind and body' (*NJTTQ*, 1). The fantasy is cut short however when Norma Jean realises that the jury is not of her peers, as these were 'excused for cause [...] both hands were in the toilet shaking out diapers' (*NJTTQ*, 1). Even in fantasy, housewives are obliged to clean up shit. The entire novel moves deftly between sardonic daydream sequences such as this and accounts of Norma Jean's everyday life. But as in Roiphe's text, the latter are not straightforward representations, for their narration alternates between the urgency of first person, and voices in the second and third person that shift between calm dispassion and moving lyricism. Moreover, the novel is systematically interrupted by fragments of texts from a range of sources including parenting manuals, text books on Ancient Egypt (Norma Jean's passion), advertising slogans for household goods, relationship advice columns, Philip Slater's seminal indictment of American individualism, *The Pursuit of Loneliness* (1970), and, most notably, newspaper headlines announcing violent domestic crimes, ecological catastrophes, and scientific discoveries regarding humankind's future obsolescence.

This narrative strategy has several effects. On one level of course, the contents of the textual fragments chosen (accounts of families murdered in their home (28; 30; 99; 102); death by microwave or hairnet (269); melting of ice caps (147); pollution (115; 143; 147); the Vietnam War (28; 38; 115)) serve to highlight the relationship between domestic frustration and broader anxieties of the period—recalling the harrowing opening of *Diary of a Mad Housewife*, where 'the windows are open and soot, like fallout, is drifting in and settling everywhere' (*DMH*, 1).

But many of the fragments in Ballantyne's text also emulate the cacophony of (usually contradictory) advice to which women are subjected on a daily basis, which undermine their sense of individual agency and are often of little practical use.³⁴ This is made explicit in the opening pages, when Norma Jean quotes from Lawrence K. France's *On the Importance of Infancy* (1966), which self-reflexively acknowledges that 'women have been exposed to a wide variety of pamphlets, books, and magazine articles [...] expressing sometimes irreconcilable professional advice' (*NJTTQ*, 8). Re-contextualised in Ballantyne's novel, these excerpts of expertise are little more

than waste, standing out for their ineffectuality in helping the new mother navigate her role. The novel conveys this humorously in Norma Jean's recollection of placing her firstborn onto the changing table, only for the baby to 'shit halfway across the room' (*NJTTQ*, 8)—an account she juxtaposes with another excerpt from France's manual: "“When the pressures within the bladder and rectum build up [...] the sphincters automatically release and allow the contents to be discharged”" (*NJTTQ*, 8). Like the previous references to *The Womanly Art of Breast Feeding* (1958) and *Handbook of Infant Care*,³⁵ the citation paradoxically serves to undermine the parenting experts' authority: regardless of how much she has read, Norma Jean notes, 'nothing prepared me for this terrible yellow mess' (*NJTTQ*, 8). Shit serves to expose the fallacy of perfect parenting, while the excerpt itself calls attention to its own redundancy. Knowing the biomechanical causes behind the 'dried yellow stains, fixed now in rivulets on the wall' (*NJTTQ*, 10), in other words, will not make them any less unpleasant.

But Norma Jean's textual fragments also provide a snatched glimpse of a world that, as Ann Oakley described it in her anthropological study of modern housewifery, *Housewife* (published a year prior to *Norma Jean*), the housewife only experiences at a distance, 'through the window over the kitchen sink.'³⁶ Norma Jean herself acknowledges this function: 'As my "window" to the outside world, [reading the news] reactivates feelings connected with that world, from which I have become detached over the years' (*NJTTQ*, 5). To take an interest in the news is to both participate in society and come to terms with it: 'The news is a reflection of the time and place in which we live. If you repeat that idea often enough it should permit enough distance so that you can [...] absorb the reality, without always (coming apart; breaking down; overreacting; getting overinvolved, overstimulated, overidentified)' (*NJTTQ*, 29). The expressions in parentheses in turn allow for the articulation of thoughts ordinarily repressed, while their eruption into the text acts as a form of digression or sabotage that prevents the sentence from ending in polite truisms.

This brings us to perhaps the most important function of the fragments. For if from one perspective the disjointed assemblage of these deracinated shards can be seen to reflect the psychological splintering of Norma Jean herself—as she puts it, 'I am at least two people: her ['Mommy'] and me' (*NJTTQ*, 28)—they can equally be seen as part of a process of reclamation. The interspersing of personal anecdotes with external sources can be seen as a 'shoring up' of fragments against the housewife's

‘ruin’—intellectual stultification and loss of self. In the novel’s opening pages, Norma Jean tells us that ‘[i]t took some experimenting to settle on just the right methods of incorporating my news’ (*NJTTQ*, 5). While purportedly referring to the delicate logistics involved in finding time to read the news, the phrasing also gives the impression that the news is being incorporated *into*, or digested *by*, Norma Jean herself. The novel *Norma Jean the Termite Queen* is effectively the product of that experimentation: a record, composed largely of re-purposed texts, of the perceptions of the housewife as she moves between the domestic (embodied in the house), public (embodied in the newspaper) and creative spheres (embodied in the garage where she makes her pottery). Where today’s newspaper is, ordinarily, tomorrow’s cat litter tray liner, here it is integrated into a story relating the condition of the alienated housewife to a broader national crisis of identity (reflected in the myriad references to the Vietnam War), and rendered part of a steady diet of outside stimuli that ultimately allows her to begin making art again in the family garage. The fragments in *Norma Jean the Termite Queen*, then, are a redemptive, reclaimable counter to the other waste matter and dirt that haunt this and the other texts under discussion. As Norma Jean-in-the-third-person expostulates:

Eat eat eat, in and out [...] What good does it do anyone? You can’t read it, you can’t exhibit it, it does not endure. She considers the thousands of meals she has prepared over the years [...] Where are they now? Clogging someone’s storm drain (*NJTTQ*, 82).

This idea that even the things a housewife produces are effectively waste-in-the-making is likewise articulated by Margaret in *Up the Sandbox!*:

Eat, eliminate, prepare food, clean up, shop, throw out the garbage [...] Despite computers and digit telephone numbers, nuclear fission, my life hardly differs from that of an Indian squaw [...] centuries ago. Pick, clean, prepare, throw out, dig a hole, bury the waste—she was my sister (*UTS*, 16).

Where the stuff the housewife produces is transient waste-in-the-making, the newspaper fragments in Ballantyne’s novel feed directly into Norma Jean’s artwork, while the daydream fragments in Roiphe’s provide imaginative sustenance to Margaret. In both instances, these forms of reclaimed literal and figurative waste combine to create the disorientating text the reader holds in his/hands. The salvaged and re-purposed headlines and reclaimed shopping list provide a counter to the meals

that will only be excreted and the general mess that the housewife tidies daily in the full knowledge that it will inevitably accrue again. Incorporated into these first-person narratives, they amount to elements of literary femmage: a counterpart to the disorientating mélange of advertisements for household goods and shocking news stories that characterise the media landscape of the period.

‘An overflowing toilet or a bloodstained chair’³⁷: Woman as waste

The reclamation of fragments and attention to literal waste in the mad housewife novel also disturbingly highlights the protagonists’ anxieties surrounding their perceived worth. These texts repeatedly foreground that a woman’s value is transient, contingent upon her ability to bear children, keep house, conceal the physical signs on her body that she has had children, and stave off aging. Thus Sasha in *Memoirs of an Ex-Housewife* notes: ‘But see what the tiniest baby will do to the woman [...] ruining her breasts [...] Producing [...] stretch marks, varicosities’ (*MOAEH*, 259-260). And yet to *not* have children invites a worse fate. In *Norma Jean the Termite Queen*, Norma Jean’s son responds to an admonishment by yelling ‘I’m going to flush you down the toilet and you’ll never be a mommy again’ (*NJTTQ*, 46)—a statement that is at once comical (particularly considering his recurrent obsession with garbage cans³⁸), and sharply insightful. Being flushed down the toilet does, indeed, preclude one from ‘being a mommy,’ but as Norma Jean knows all too well, society also views ‘never be[ing] a mommy’ as tantamount to flushing one’s *self* down the toilet. Such representations are not limited to the more experimental of the mad housewife novels but are a staple of the genre. *Diary of a Mad Housewife*’s Tina notes: ‘Women like me, after a certain number of years of Fulfilling [*sic*] themselves in domestic necessities, are supposed to [...] re-enter The Great World’ to work, study, or run charity events—‘it doesn’t matter what, as long as it’s Action [*sic*]’ (*DOAMH*, 60). Her paralysis is the antithesis of such ‘Action,’ serving no social purpose, while the diary in which she expresses that paralysis when she should be doing housework amounts to a form of radical abstention. The conflation of the ‘malfunctioning’ housewife with waste is in turn literalised in *The Cracker Factory*. An otherwise conventionally realist novel inspired by the perceived surge in the 1960s in housewives diagnosed with psychiatric illnesses³⁹ and Rebekah-Burditt’s own nervous breakdown,⁴⁰ and which culminates with the protagonist’s reintegration into polite

society, *The Cracker Factory* features a comical scene in which protagonist Cassie puts the meal she has cooked down the garbage disposal before even serving it, thinking that the pot of noodles she is holding is just leftovers (*TCF*, 8). Her family perceives this as evidence of her insanity. The scene is painful in its dark exposition of the ways in which the housewife's value is measured against her output. The dinner that goes straight down the disposal literalises Norma Jean and Margaret's fears, discussed earlier, that all they are doing is producing matter that will eventually be shat out (in this case effectively accelerating that process by entirely circumventing the colon and aiming straight for the sewers), while highlighting the extent to which the failure to perform her role is perceived as a form of malfunction rather than an effect of its inexhaustible demands. Such a view is echoed in Marilyn French's *The Women's Room*, where one character is sent to an insane asylum for 'being a poor housewife' (*WR*, 167). "this place is [...] a country club for women whose husbands don't want them anymore" (*WR*, 243). Following her first discharge, she notes: "I clean and clean and clean. If I don't, they'll send me back" (*WR*, 194). Elsewhere, a character describes: "I look back to my own life and all I see is a bombed-out terrain [...] I feel like a survivor who has lost everything but her life, who wanders around inside a skinny shrivelled body, collecting dandelion greens and muttering to herself" (*WR*, 218). The female body in this passage is merely a used-up container, the past little more than a parched landscape.

Ballantyne, Roiphe and Schulman's texts enact these anxieties about the errant female body at the level of form. This is most evident in the final pages of *Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen*, as Sasha leafs through women's magazines at the beauty salon while waiting to get a hair cut that will make her look younger. The last section of the novel is interspersed with slogans from the magazines' advertisements, including: 'Can a cream really make dramatic improvements in aging skin? [...] Gone forever that flaky caky feeling, washed away with Beauty Bar (265).' Reading these prove more instructive than 'all my study of philosophy' in clarifying connections between causes and effects, for she realises:

Are not the products promoted in the magazines intended to halt precisely those developments that cannot be halted? [...] Suddenly under the dryer I saw that those remedies I had come to count on—haircuts, diets, sun, lovers—would produce in time such terrible

symptoms of their own that more cures, more tricks, more devices would be necessary to control them (*MOAEPQ*, 266).

From here, the text transitions into a surrealistic daydream, narrated in the present tense, featuring the head of Sasha's high school sorority, Beverly Katz, who in the opening chapters of the novel told Sasha that she would not be able to 'get away with this shit [trade on her looks] forever' (*MOAEPQ*, 57). In the daydream, Beverly is dressed as a rabbit with the face of a large clock, and gets grabbed by the tail by a 'Blue Fairy' who, 'pinning her second hand, washes her mouth out with soap (Beauty Bar)' (*MOAEPQ*, 267). Then:

The Blue Fairy, with a touch of her wand, transforms the soap to a special-formula antibacterial anti-acne unguent (twenty-seven dollars the quarter ounce) with which she gently swabs Beverly's face. The second hand stops. The minute hands stops. Only the hour hand continues on its inexorable course (*MOAEPQ*, 267).

Gushing soap froth, Beverly ecstatically expounds: 'At fine cosmetics counters everywhere' (*MOAEPQ*, 268).

Schulman juxtaposes references to Disney's *Alice in Wonderland* (1951) with the rhetoric of advertising and a character not mentioned since the novel's early description of Sasha's coronation as prom queen. The result is a dream-testimonial that parodies the television and print advertisements run by Dove in the late 1960s to advertise its Beauty Bar (first launched in 1957), which likewise featured testimonials by 'real' women extolling the soap's moisturising qualities.⁴¹ The dream, here, features a hyper-Beauty Bar—one that not only cleans and moisturises but that can also defeat acne, pause time (embodied in the stopped minute hand on Beverly Katz's face), and help 'wash out' a head sorority's girl mouth for uttering a profane word ('shit') and for making the profane suggestion that the prom queen's beauty will not last forever.

Sasha's dream then shifts tack, and she sees herself at a beauty pageant where she is being judged by Nietzsche, Schopenhauer and Spinoza, who she read so avidly as an undergraduate, but whom she abandoned to keep house for and financially support her first husband during his postdoctoral studies. She attempts to apply Chap Stick to a crack in her cheek that grows every time she smiles, but the crack 'deepens dangerously,' becoming 'a veritable fault in the landscape. Perhaps we will have to evacuate the area' (*MOAEPQ*, 269). The dream ends with her disqualification from

the pageant, for, the judges explain, ““you have made the toilet overflow. You have an ugly pimple on your chin. Your time is up”” (*MOAEPQ*, 270).

The phrasing here is important, for just as the widening crater on Sasha’s face brings to mind a nuclear apocalypse, thereby equating ageing with the annihilation of the human race, the reference to the clogged toilet refers back to three crucial scenes earlier in the text. In the first, an adolescent Sasha clogs her boyfriend’s parents’ toilet when she flushes a Kotex she is too embarrassed to dispose of in the kitchen trash (*MOAEPQ*, 68-69). In the second, far later, scene, Sasha’s mother urges her to use anti-ageing night cream and points proudly to her ““family”” of cosmetic creams that ““keeps getting bigger and bigger”” (*MOAEPQ*, 227). The mention of this ‘family’ makes Sasha think of the

parasite perhaps even now clogging my womb, like the Kotex clogging the toilet, the monthly nightmare: How, oh how, to get rid of it? At the bottom of all my bad dreams was one or the other, an overflowing toilet or a bloodstained chair (*MOAEPQ*, 226).

As Susan Morrison notes, Western society since at least the Middle Ages has viewed the female body as a polluting, ‘filthy pit,’ ‘most obviously in menstrual flows’ but also in its capacity to bear children and attract lust.⁴² In their cultural history of menstruation, Andrew Shail and Gillian Howie further argue that the female body throughout Western history ‘exemplified and manifested the threat of “corporeal chaos.”’⁴³ Such horror, likewise, is the focus of Kristeva’s conceptualisation of the abject, mentioned earlier—which highlighted the extent to which the maternal body has been historically framed as a site of horror.⁴⁴ In juxtaposing Sasha’s conflation of menstrual blood, shame-inducing sanitary protection, a ‘parasitical’ foetus, and her mother’s proliferating anti-ageing products (designed to stave off the body’s wasting), Schulman shows a clear connection between the myriad ways in which the female body itself, more than the male, is socially constructed as a conduit for and producer of waste—as Elizabeth Grosz describes it, as ‘viscosity, entrapping, secreting.’⁴⁵ In so doing, Schulman produces a textual femmage that salvages those aspects of the female body that advertising seeks to obscure, and that remained largely outside the frame of visual art and writing by male avant-gardists and their descendants. As Maggie Nelson puts it:

Whereas the art of Smithson, Schwitters, Duchamp, Rauschenberg, Ashbery, Joyc, etc., has been celebrated for its sifting through the dirt

and detritus of ‘modern life,’ whether literally or figuratively, this enterprise differs for women, whose filth has been presumed—across cultures and across centuries—to come both from within and from without.⁴⁶

The framing of these bloodied waste forms marks them out as different, too, from the bloody Kotex in William Burroughs’s *Naked Lunch* (1959) and the used tampon in Don DeLillo’s later *White Noise* (1986). Where the former certainly expresses latent anxieties about the female body, it also embodies specific fears surrounding disposable goods’ potential to ‘turn America into a dump’ (Alworth, 61). In DeLillo’s text, protagonist Jack Gladney famously interprets the tampon as ‘the dark underside of our consumer consciousness’⁴⁷—a comment that entirely occludes the gendered nature of the discard he is observing. In contrast to these, Schulman’s text focuses on the gendered nature of these excretions to elevate Western culture’s subtle yet ever-present equating of the female body with waste from subtext to text.

This is most apparent in the highly graphic depiction of Sasha’s home abortion, which results in her waking in the middle of the night thinking she needs the toilet:

I sat on the toilet and pushed and pushed. Then out it popped, my first baby. I looked down. It was suspended over the water in the toilet bowl [...] the first baby I produced in this world I deposited like a piece of shit straight into the toilet (*MOAEPQ*, 230).

It is a harrowing scene, no less so in its Medieval undertones: as Morrison notes, the Middle English word *birthen* meant ‘burden, fetus, excrement, afterbirth, or placenta—all things ejected by the body’ (51). Thus ‘giving birth [in the Medieval imagination] is like shitting’ (51). Sasha’s perception of the abortion is disorientating as much in its echoes of pre-modernity as in its emphasis on the excremental.

The mention, then, in the dream sequence of the novel discussed above, to the overflowing toilet refers back to the primordial quality of the toilet abortion, the fears of physical imperfection Sasha has voiced throughout the text, and her recent realisation of the inevitability of ageing. The accusation: “‘you have made the toilet overflow. You have an ugly pimple on your chin. Your time is up’” conflates all of the sins of the (female) body into one image of a sullying, imperfect and expired thing—suggesting corporeality itself to be enough cause for a kind of cosmic disqualification. But by bringing cultural anxieties about the female body to the

surface, and by placing them at the narrative's centre, Schulman reclaims these excretions.

Images of the filthy female body also proliferate in Marilyn French's *The Women's Room*, where the narrator at one point compares unexplained storylines and characters left by the wayside to 'women's troubles' one knows not to discuss: 'You have this vague sense of oozings and drippings, blood that insists on pouring out of assorted holes' (WR, 217). Later, another character sarcastically comments that women were historically kept out of Harvard for sanitary reasons: "'Splat, splat, a big clot of menstrual blood right on the threshold. Every place women go they do it: splat splat'" (WR, 315). These anxieties are in turn reprised in Mira's recurring nightmare, in which she arrives at her oral exams to find a pile of her 'stained sanitary napkins' and 'bloody underpants' that she cannot conceal from the all-male board of examiners (WR, 424). Echoing *Memoirs of An Ex-Housewife*, the nightmare equates Mira's out-of-placeness within the academy with a fallible, misbehaving female body that goes 'splat splat,' and posits the novel itself as a forum in which such 'splat splat' is instead given space.

These explorations of the dirty female body are in turn echoed in *Up the Sandbox!*, where Margaret Reynolds reflects upon the seemingly spurious events that cause the 'dividing foetus that may be my next baby' to instead be shed and 'ooze out between my legs—waste product like urine and faeces, like a snake's last year's skin, like clipped toenails in the toilet bowl' (UTS, 80). She likewise imagines how losing her daughter to a violent death would render her akin to 'a woman with a hole in the center, in the bowels, a great gaping hole from breast to genitals, for the wind to blow through, for trash to collect in, for everyone to know I am emptied of myself' (UTS, 56). The passage combines the social stigma of not having children, the personal sense of bereavement that comes with losing a child, recognition that menstrual blood is unnecessary matter, and *pride* regarding the potential for that waste matter to be transformed into life. The female body's fundamentally ambivalent status is in turn highlighted in the novel's penultimate fantasy, where Margaret imagines herself to be part of a group of women in Vietnam protesting the war, having threatened 'a caravan of baby carriages blocking all traffic across the Potomac,' the 'resulting worldwide publicity [of which] would have been enough to make even a Dr Strangelove shudder' (UTS, 116). Like her prior fantasies, however, the fantasy ends in supreme and painful defeat. Margaret the activist visits a convent where 'a special event' is taking place to

raise the church's international profile (*UTS*, 122). The event is a public sacrifice of one of the nuns, who is made to bathe, naked, in a bathtub filled with piranhas. In the end, '[t]here was nothing left but bones floating in the water [...]' Her soul of course was already in heaven, the rest in the waste products of the piranha fish' (*UTS*, 127). The scene literalises the idea, implied throughout the novel, of the consumed woman: the imaginary nun who dies for an ultimately fruitless cause (since the fighting does not stop) embodies the perceived fruitlessness of Margaret's own life, spent watching her daughter play in the sandbox and feeling powerless in the face of global events. And it is radically different waste matter to that represented in the work of Roiphe's male contemporaries, or indeed to that in the first surrealist novels—André Breton's *Nadja* (1928), say, or Max Ernst's *Une Semaine De Bonté* (1934)—for here it is the woman herself who has been chewed up and spewed out.

Radical dirt, feminist mess

The texts in question also stand out, however, in their recognition of the feminist potential of *un-reclaimed*, *un-treated* mess. Waste and dirt, that is, can be rendered radical simply by being left alone—all it takes is to allow that which should be swept away to accrue, and to subtly introduce it into the places it shouldn't be. In *Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen*, Sasha's friend Roxanne, who married a West Point cadet after getting pregnant, argues that failing at housework is the best way to escape an unhappy marriage. In a passage that both parodies the rhetoric of relationship columnists of the period, and directly contradicts such columnists' advice, Roxanne advises Sasha how to fail at everyday tasks and leave a trail of waste around the house. "First there are the dailies," she says:

scorching the favorite shirt [...] over-Accenting the scrambled eggs.
You wouldn't believe what a mere first lieutenant can demand to be served for his breakfast, and every course presents a new challenge to the ingenious homemaker (*MOAEPQ*, 183).

Where happy homemaker columns presented the 'ingenious homemaker' as one who creates marvels out of leftovers,⁴⁸ here she is presented as someone who craftily "leave[s] dirty diapers in selected spots" and "when [the husband] and his buddies

were going fishing, [...] put a raw egg in his lunchbox instead of a hard-boiled one”” (*MOAEPQ*, 183). Schulman redefines the ‘ingenious homemaker’ as she who surreptitiously and systematically causes her husband discomfort in myriad undetectable ways. She is akin to what Michel de Certeau described, in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1986), as the ‘tactic’ that subtly undermines the hegemony through creative stealth.⁴⁹ Borrowing from military lexicon, which distinguishes between the ‘strategic’ operations of those operating within their own territory and the ‘tactical’ operations of guerrilla soldiers, de Certeau described ways in which individuals might operate outside of the rules prescribed by capitalist bureaucracy. One of the examples he cited was that of housewives who use processed foods differently to how the manufacturer intended them to be used (de Certeau, xix). Roxanne takes this ethos to the extreme, transforming domestic items into errant matter. Living on an army base in a house provided by her husband’s employers, and with no resources at her disposal, she deploys mess and waste to tactically overcome her adversary.

Such tactical work takes a very different form in the childhood card collecting Sasha describes at the novel’s outset, which she and her fellow female classmates took up since climbing trees was deemed un-ladylike (*MOAEPQ*, 20). There being no female equivalent to the ‘commercially manufactured for collecting’ cards for boys, the girls make do with cast-offs from packs of playing cards. But this making do—what de Certeau, after Claude Lévi-Strauss, termed ‘bricolage’⁵⁰—is framed positively. For the girls’ collections, Sasha rhapsodises, ‘were made up of real adult playing cards, one of a kind salvaged from broken packs, which we valued for the charm of the pictures on their backs’ (*MOAEPQ*, 20). The original purpose of the playing cards having been abandoned, the pattern on the back—traditionally viewed as inconsequential—is charged with new significance. The girls themselves are the arbiters both of the individual cards’ value and the game’s rules, which are a product of their invention rather than part of a marketing effort to sell bubble gum.

Furthermore, ‘like life itself the collection had an open future. No card was so odd as to lack a fixed and perfect place in my endlessly adaptable collection. I loved them all’ (*MOAEPQ*, 21). As well as a poignant description of the unexpected values that children attach to objects others deem worthless, the passage is significant in its identification of the special charge that collections hold for their owners, and their capacity to empower: the potential endlessness of the collecting process, articulated by Baudrillard in ‘The System of Collecting,’ is identified here as akin to the

unwritten quality of the future.⁵¹ One of the women Ann Oakley interviewed for *Housewife* noted how ‘you’re born, you get the prams and everything—and then later you get the real things. It’s all planned for you’ (Oakley, 154). Similarly, Sasha recounts how ‘from the moment we got kicked out of the trees and sent into the walk-in dollhouse back in kindergarten, our movements and efforts [were] confined’ (*MOAEPQ*, 22). But where much of *Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen*—and much of ‘mad housewife’ fiction more broadly—traces this inevitable trajectory from playing at housework to doing it, the scene in question suggests other possibilities. Just as the reclaimed cards provide an alternative course to the pastimes produced by confectionary manufacturers for the lucrative boys’ market, the girls’ strange collections, which are deemed valuable only by them, provide a means to imagine endless permutations of both cards and possible life outcomes. In their reliance on salvaging and saving, they might even be categorized as femmages-in-the-making.

A similar understanding of the emancipatory dimension of detritus for little girls specifically is manifest in *Up the Sandbox!*, where watching her daughter play in the ‘dirt and clutter’ of the playground (*UTS*, 45) alleviates both Margaret’s boredom and her guilt over her failures as a homemaker. ‘How to fill the day—how to get through it?—I can sit on this bench and not feel things are all apart’ (*UTS*, 45). While her husband, a ‘scholar of disorder’ (*UTS*, 45), searches for ‘some sensible thread, some explanation for bloodshed, revolution, poverty’ (*UTS*, 45), Margaret relishes watching her daughter get dirty. ‘The dirt is from the feeling and the touching of all possible surfaces, and a certain lack of concern, a certain pleasure in doing things uninhibited by prissy thoughts and stuffy manners’ (*UTS*, 56). It is an exact counter to the sterilised environs celebrated in *Good Housekeeping*, *Better Living*, or *Woman’s Way*, marketed by manufacturers of commercial cleaning products, and which she herself is expected to replicate in her own home.⁵² The implicit hope is that the future holds more in store for this child than vacuuming the house: perhaps she will not be judged when her ‘house [is] a garbage dump’ (*UTS*, 49).

This redemptive aspect of everyday ephemera and filth is expressed in *The Women’s Room*, where Mira makes a snide comment about the ‘filthy refrigerators’ that the housewife will inevitably be obliged to clean despite any aspiration she might have to loftier intellectual endeavours. Her fellow (female) PhD students proceed to tease her for being “[s]tuck forever through history with the stinking refrigerator!” (*WR*, 250), while one suggests she write a paper on “‘The Frost-Free Syndrome in

‘Fire and Ice’” (WR, 250). On one level, this sarcastic reference to the potential for an academic study of housework underscores the marginal status that domesticity has historically held in literary studies while mocking the academy as a whole as removed from the filth of everyday life. But the passage can *also* be seen as a rebuttal of the tendency Charlotte Brundsen has identified among feminist intellectuals in the 1970s and 1980s to define themselves in opposition to the ‘Other’ of conventional femininity through scholarship that critiqued the very culture they had ‘abandoned or disavowed to gain [...] entry into the academy’ (3-5). Such a strategy involved ‘a classic splitting in which the feminist academic investigates her abandoned or fictional other—the female consumer of popular culture’ (Brunsdon, 5). The studies playfully imagined by French’s characters are paradigmatic of this new body of feminist scholarship—but in contrast to these real-life intellectuals, Mira is thanked by her friends ““for always remembering the stinking, filthy refrigerator!”” (WR, 250) which is posited, here, as an allegory for gender inequality and a sacred cultural artefact. As the narrator puts it at the novel’s outset: ‘Truthfully, I hate these grimy details as much as you do. [...] But grimy details are not in the background of the lives of most women; they are the entire surface’ (WR, 46-47).

Perhaps the most affirmative passage in these novels, however, is the opening sequence of *Norma Jean the Termite Queen*, where Norma Jean deconstructs the very meaning of the word ‘housewife,’ dispassionately bringing together all of its various associations in one surrealistic image:

Housewife? We all know how sloppy that one is, the tendency it has to evoke a kind of back-room imagery, where all the trivia is stored. With Housewife the image usually centers on some vague woman going after dust balls with her Electrolux, slipping an endless array of pies and cakes into her oven, swatting the kids, matching fabric samples, running up curtains on her Singer, having orgasms in the laundry room while inhaling the whiteness of her wash. It varies. Some don’t swat their kids; they offer them plates of hot cookies, or pour them glasses of Tang from bottomless pitchers. Taken in its most literal sense, the term arouses the image of a woman dancing with her house, which has just slipped a half-carat diamond ring on her finger. She is embracing her house, out of gratitude. Then she straightens its tie, brushes the leaves off its roof, gives it backrubs, and finally copulates with it (4).

The passage stands out in its identification of the central tropes of post-war advertisements for domestic goods (ecstasy-inducing laundry powder, a devotion to housework verging on mania, the conflation of physical house and family) as well as in its replication of the dizzying cumulative effect of the advertising landscape of the

period.⁵³ The paragon housekeeper, here, is a woman caught in a perpetual limbo between just-averted filth and an unobtainable perfection, while the jarring juxtaposition of these different ‘versions’ of the idealised housewife with an anthropomorphised house, imbues the critique itself with a buoyant, almost ecstatic, energy. The source of ridicule here is not the housewife herself, but the equating of cleanliness and domestic bliss, a leaf-free roof and marital harmony. In re-purposing these images, Ballantyne ‘messes up’ the carefully cultivated messages of the cleaning products and processed foods industry, exposing them as nonsense. Where advertising from the 1960s onwards poached from the avant-garde’s techniques of collage and montage to sell goods, Ballantyne’s passage takes the techniques of advertising and turns them back into a chaotic and absurd pageant that undermines these aims.⁵⁴ The housewife figure she creates here is animatedly unproductive and gloriously inefficient—shifting nonsensically between baking, cleaning, and having sex with her house like some broken automaton—while the insanity she displays reflects back on that of the system that produced her. Through this dismembering, dismantling, and re-purposing of the iconography of the housewife, Ballantyne politicizes the homemaker herself, suggesting that it is precisely out of the ‘backroom imagery, where all the trivia is stored’ that radical change might spring. The reader is thus alerted to a pullulating potential lying just below the surface of things.

As I stated at the outset, there remains a tendency even among feminist scholars to read the mad housewife novels of the 1960s and 1970s as deserving of study ‘despite’ their alleged formulaic or repetitive literary style—a view arguably cemented by their status as bestsellers and the adaptation of many of them into feature-length or made-for-television films.⁵⁵ But while it could certainly be argued that the original novel of the genre, *Diary of a Mad Housewife*, and Rebetta-Burditt’s later novel *The Cracker Factory* are of dubious literary value, or that *The Women’s Room* frequently lapses into a belaboured didacticism, *Norma Jean the Termite Queen*, *Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen*, and *Up the Sandbox!* warrant recognition as both formally and politically provocative works. These texts extend and elaborate the formal strategies of the avant-garde and neo-avant-garde, incorporating domestic effluvia and fragments from the outside world into powerful personal narratives that challenge and inconvenience the patriarchal systems in which they are trapped. They

politicize ‘female filth’—menstrual blood, aborted fetuses, used sanitary products, the ageing body—by placing it centre stage, and they suggest the ways in which dirt itself might be viewed as radical. Understanding the ways in which waste and its reclamation structure both the narrative and form of these texts allows us to appreciate them as exemplary works of experimental literature as much as seminal participants in the dissemination of feminism to mainstream audiences.

The author wishes to thank the peer reviewers as well as Chiara Briganti, Benjamin George, and Theophilus Savvas for their feedback during the various re-drafts of this article.

¹ Anne Richardson Roiphe, *Up the Sandbox!* (Greenwich, CN: Fawcett Crest, 1972 [1970]), p. 49.

² Sue Kaufman, *Diary of a Mad Housewife* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971 [1967]), p. 67. Henceforth, *DMH*.

³ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (London: Penguin, 2010 [1963]).

⁴ Imelda Whelehan, *The Feminist Bestseller: From Sex and the Single Girl to Sex and the City* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 63. Whelehan identifies this genre as the work of ‘white, middle-class, predominantly heterosexual women’ (18) concerned with the ‘intense pressure to perform [...] femininity’ according to the dictates of women’s magazines and advertising (63-64).

⁵ Schulman was a member of the Redstockings and WITCH (Women’s International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell) and was well-known in feminist circles for authoring a proposal for husbands and wives to divide household chores equally (Whelehan, 85). While French was not formally affiliated with any one feminist group, she has described herself as a feminist. See Kim A. Loudermilk, *Fictional Feminism: How American Bestsellers Affect the Movement for Women’s Equality* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 43. Gayle Greene suggests that Ballantyne was influenced by feminist novels such as *The Bell Jar* and *The Golden Notebook*. See Gayle Greene, *Changing the Story: Feminist Fiction and the Tradition* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), pp. 82-83. Roiphe is known as much for nonfiction feminist writings as she is for her fiction.

⁶ The most notable studies in this area are Stacy Gillis and Joanne Hollows’ edited volume, *Feminism, Domesticity and Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 2008), which examines the effects of popular culture’s ‘othering’ of the housewife on feminist discourse and perceptions of domesticity more broadly; Stéphanie Genz’s *Postfemininities in Popular Culture* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), whose chapter on the ‘(Un)happy housewife’ builds on Gillis and Hollows’ work to trace the influence of Friedan and other feminists on 1970s fiction; and Whelehan’s chapter on ‘Mad housewives,’ which examines how these novels in turn have influenced feminist thought.

⁷ See, for example, Charlotte Brunsdon’s *The Feminist, The Housewife, and the Soap Opera* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), which examines feminist intellectuals’ and scholars’ self-definition in opposition to the housewife myth. Lesley Johnson and Justine Lloyd’s *Sentenced to Everyday Life: Feminism and the Housewife* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2004), in turn argues that dissatisfaction with the ideal of the perfect homemaker was in fact expressed in popular film and magazines even before second-wave feminism gained sway.

⁸ Alix Kates Schulman, *Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 2007 [1969]), henceforth, *MOAEPQ*; Anne Richardson Roiphe, *Up the Sandbox!* (Greenwich, CN: Fawcett Crest, 1972 [1970]), henceforth, *UTS*; Sheila Ballantyne, *Norma Jean the Termite Queen* (New York: Penguin, 1983 [1975]), henceforth, *NJTTQ*; Marilyn French, *The Women’s Room* (London: Virago, 2004 [1997]), henceforth, *WR*; Joyce Rebeta-Burditt, *The Cracker Factory* (New York: Wyatt-MacKenzie, 2010 [1977]), henceforth, *CF*.

⁹ Maroula Joannou, *Contemporary Women’s Writing: From The Golden Notebook to the Color Purple* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 106. Loudermilk likewise notes that since its publication in 1977, French’s novel ‘has been discussed less as a work of literature than as a publishing and literary phenomenon’ (45). The most notable exceptions to this characterization of the mad housewife novels as ‘pulp’ are Gayle Greene’s exploration of the formal ingenuity of Ballantyne’s text (*Changing the Story*, 82), Rita Felski’s

Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), which provocingly questions the tendency to conflate formal experimentation and political radicalism (30), and Jane Elliott's *Popular Feminist Fiction as Allegory: Representing National Time* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008), which argues that even the most realist of these texts nevertheless disrupt linear narrative.

¹⁰ While *Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen* recounts the life of its protagonist from childhood to motherhood, and *The Women's Room* recounts the life stories of a dozen different women coming of age between 1950 and 1970, *Up the Sandbox!* and *Norma Jean the Termite Queen* have no plot to speak of, effectively enumerating a series of more or less inconsequential daily events that are difficult to even locate chronologically. The movement between (narrative) past and present in *Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen* and *The Women's Room* likewise undermines any sense of narrative progression. This plotlessness is acutely bound up with the novels' politics, reflecting both the aimlessness of their protagonists' lives and their authors' concern with recuperating the uneventful and mundane.

¹¹ Female writers are generally given far less prominence in studies of waste literature than their male counterparts: Will Viney's *Waste: A Philosophy of Things* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014); Christopher Smith's *The Poetics of Waste* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); and my own book on the subject, *Consumerism, Waste, and Re-use in Twentieth-century Fiction* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) feature roughly one woman for every five to ten men, while women writers are entirely absent from John Scanlan's *On Garbage* (New York: Reaktion Books, 2005) and Sarah K. Harrison's *Waste Matters: Urban Margins in Contemporary Literature* (London: Routledge, 2015). An exception to this male-centrism is Morrison's *The Literature of Waste: Material Ecopoetics and Ethical Matter* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

¹² It is noteworthy for example that these texts go unmentioned in Christopher Gair's *The American Counterculture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), which moves swiftly from categorizing Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* as concerned with 'the middle-class American housewife whose routine of cooking, cleaning, coffee mornings and school-runs represents everything that the counterculture sought to reject' (22), to focusing on the patriarchal attitudes of this largely male counterculture. In limiting his focus on women's writing to that of women who directly participated in the Beat movement (Diane di Prima) or who overtly criticized its misogyny (Kate Millett), Gair inadvertently overlooks the ways in which women writers also adopted the Beats' experimental practices to critique the bourgeois home from within.

¹³ While such a discussion falls outside the remit of this particular article, it is worth highlighting the subtle sexism of scholarship that places such strict qualifiers around the value of studying popular novels by women. To explicitly dismiss the literary value of an entire genre risks, to my mind, reproducing the same mistakes made by its first reviewers.

¹⁴ For a nuanced account of the cultural influence of collage across the last century, see Rona Cran, *Collage in Twentieth-century Art, Literature, and Culture: Joseph Cornell, William Burroughs, Frank O'Hara and Bob Dylan* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014).

¹⁵ Mark Gottdeiner, *Postmodern Semiotics: Material Culture and the Forms of Postmodern Life* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 140, qtd. in *Containing America: Cultural Production and Consumption in 1950s America*, ed. Nathan Abrams and Julie Hughes (Birmingham: University of Birmingham Press, 2000), p. 32; Elizabeth Cohen's *A Consumer's Republic* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003) is, to my mind, the most thorough historical investigation into the origins of the association of consumerism with notions of good citizenship and democratic freedom in American culture. Ruth Oldenziel and Karin Zachman provide specific insights into the relationship between these and a carefully crafted notion of the emancipated American housewife that emerged in the postwar period. See 'Kitchens as Technology and Politics: An Introduction,' in *Cold War Kitchen: Americanization, Technology and European Users*, ed. Ruth Oldenziel and Karin Zachmann (Boston: MIT Press, 2009), pp. 1-32.

¹⁶ Gillian Whiteley, *Junk: Art and the Politics of Trash* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010), pp. 35-53.

¹⁷ James Peterson, *Dreams of Chaos, Visions of Order: Understanding the American Avant-Garde Cinema* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994), pp. 146-147; David R. Cole and Joff P.N. Bradley, 'Decoding through Cinema: The Case of Arthur Lipsett,' in *A Pedagogy of Cinema* (Rotterdam and Taipei: Sense Publishers, 2014), pp. 35-56. See especially 44-47.

¹⁸ See also Anna Dezeuze, *Almost Nothing: Observations on Precarious Practices in Contemporary Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), p. 42.

¹⁹ Purifoy is best remembered for the desert assemblage *66 Signs of Neon*, created as a response to the Watts Riots (Cécile Whiting, 'The Watts Towers as Urban Landmark,' *Pop L.A.: Art and the City in the 1960s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), pp. 139-166). For insight into collage's deployment by early feminist artists, see Natalya Lusty, 'Sexing the Manifesto: Mina Loy, Feminism, and Futurism', *Women: A Cultural Review*. 19 (3): 245-260.

²⁰ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge, 2007 [1966]), p. 202.

²¹ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, transl. H. M. Parshley (London: Vintage, 1977 [1949]), p. 271.

²² For details of the time spent on housework across the twentieth century, see Susan Strasser, *Never Done: A History of American Housework* (New York: Owl Books, 1982). Ruth Schwartz Cowan traces the ways in which innovations in cleaning products and domestic appliances created new household chores in *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave*. New York: Basic Books, 1983. Rosie Cox has written extensively about the vilification of domestic dirt: see in particular *Dirt: New Geographies of Cleanliness and Contamination* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), and 'Dishing the Dirt: Dirt in the

Home,' in *The Filthy Reality of Everyday Life* (London: Profile Books, 2011), pp. 37-74. Jessamyn Neuhaus traces the ways in which American advertisers cultivated anxiety around dirt, odours, and water spots (on dishware) in order to prolong the time women spent cleaning and increase the number of cleaning products they used. See *Housework and Housewives in Modern American Advertising: Married to the Mop* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), esp. p. 168 and p. 183.

²³ Julia Kristeva, 'Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection' (1980), in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Kelly Oliver (Columbia University Press: New York, 1997), p. 232. Residing in both the self and the outside world, the abject is 'something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object' (232). Menstrual blood, feces, and other bodily emissions are all abject.

²⁴ Melissa Meyer and Miriam Schapiro, 'Waste not, Want not: An Inquiry into What Women Saved and Assembled—Femmage', *Heresies: Women's Traditional Arts: The Politics of Aesthetics* (Winter, 1978): 66-69.

²⁵ *Up the Sandbox!*, p. 45.

²⁶ For an incisive discussion of this work in relation to postwar American literature and culture, see 'Supermarket Sociology' in David Alworth, *Site Reading: Fiction, Art, Social Form* (Princeton University Press, 2015), pp. 25-49.

²⁷ 'Make the most of their "Wonder Years,"' and 'Saigon: Nervous, swollen, beset by inflation and corruption—with a government determined to forge a social revolution,' *Life* (February 25, 1966), pp. 46 and 47-64. The ad advertised the bread's capacity to 'help build strong bodies 12 ways' and called for mothers to relish every moment of their off-springs' childhood; the article described the effects of the Vietnam War on Saigon, replete with images of devastation and overt praise of the U.S. occupation.

²⁸ Irving Sandler, *American Art of the 1960s* (Harper & Row, 1988). Sandler notes that as well as *Time* and *Life*, the 'big-circulation' newspapers covered the movement ad nauseam throughout the latter half of the decade, but focused largely on its novelty value (143).

²⁹ 'Far-out Refrigerators: Even Pop Art is Used to Dress Up New Models,' *Life* 58.8 (February 26, 1965), pp. 55-56. Campbell's pop art merchandise included a soup-can shaped handbag and the now-famous 'Souper Dress,' a paper dress patterned with Campbell's Soup and designed to be thrown away after one use. One of these dresses is now housed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. See Bonnie English, *A Cultural History of Fashion in the 20th Century: From Catwalk to Sidewalk* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 108.

³⁰ 'You Bought it, Now Live With It,' *Life* 59.3 (July 16, 1965), pp. 56-60.

³¹ For a sense of the debate that instead recognised the critique of consumerism implicit in Oldenberg and other's work, see Donald Kuspit, 'Pop Art: A Reactionary Realism,' *Art Journal* 36.1 (Fall 1976), pp. 31-38.

³² Lisa Maria Hogeland, *Feminism and its Fictions* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), p. 24, qtd. in Whelehan, p. 8.

³³ While an extensive account of the Marxist discussion of housework is beyond the scope of this article, it is worth highlighting Juliet Mitchell's 'Women: The Longest Revolution,' an article first published in the Nov/Dec 1966 issue of *New Left Review* that catalysed a wider debate about the exploitation of women in the home by tracing the views of de Beauvoir, Millett and others on housework. This was followed by Margaret Benston, 'The Political Economy of Women,' *Monthly Review* (Sept 1969), which criticised Mitchell for downplaying the economic role of oppression in women's lives, and Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James's *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community* (Bristol: Pétroleuse Press, 1973). Other notable interventions include Wally Secombe's 'The Housewife and Her Labour Under Capitalism,' *New Left Review* 1.83 (Jan-Feb 1974), which in turn sparked the ire of Margaret Coulson, Branka Magas and Hilary Wainwright in "'The Housewife and Her Labour under Capitalism': A Critique,' *New Left Review* 1.89 (Jan-Feb 1975). While disagreeing over definitions of 'value,' 'labour,' and 'production,' these different theorists were united in recognising that critics of capitalism overlooked housework at their own peril.

³⁴ Johnson and Lloyd provide useful glosses of the rise of 'conduct books,' building on Anthony Giddens's analysis of the self-help in late modernity in *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), pp. 2-3. See Johnson and Lloyd, pp. 13-14.

³⁵ I have been unable to determine whether this is a real text, so have been unable to provide a date of publication.

³⁶ Ann Oakley, *Housewife* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985 [1974]), p. 59. Oakley here is paraphrasing the Peckham Rye Women's Liberation Workshop Collective's contention, in *A Woman's Work is Never Done* (Agitrop, 1970), that "'Our window on the world is looked through with our hands in the sink'" (5), which she cites directly on page 32. The expression resurfaces in a wealth of feminist criticism from the late 1960s onward.

³⁷ *Memoirs of an Ex Prom-Queen*, p. 226.

³⁸ *Norma Jean the Termite Queen*, p. 45.

³⁹ See Ali Haggett, *Desperate Housewives, Neuroses, and the Domestic Environment, 1945-1970* (London: Routledge, 2012). Haggett notes the distance between the perception of 'housewifery and mothering [as] literally ma[king] women "ill," [which] provided much needed substance to feminist campaigns for equality' and more recent historical studies of the period, which show female predominance in psychiatric cases of the period to have been 'far from monolithic' (2).

⁴⁰ Nancy Faber, 'She's Been Through the Ordeal', *People*, September 5, 1977.

⁴¹ See David A. Aaker, 'The Dove Story', in *Managing Brand Equity: Capitalizing on the Value of a Brand Name* (New York: Simon&Schuster, 1991), 153-154; Sarah Banet-Weiser, *AuthenticTM: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture* (New York University Press, 2012), pp. 23-25; and Jessamyn Neuhaus's analysis of the function of testimonials in *Married to the Mop*, pp. 96-97.

⁴² Susan Signe Morrison, 'Gendered Filth', in *Excrement in the Late Middle Ages: Sacred Filth and Chaucer's Fecopoetics* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 45-56 (47). Morrison further notes how prostitutes and promiscuous women were associated with filth (48-49), while the Middle English word *birthen*, meant 'burden, fetus, excrement, afterbirth, or placenta—all things ejected by the body' (51). Thus 'giving birth [in the Medieval imagination] is like shitting' (51).

⁴³ Andrew Shail and Gillian Howie, 'Introduction' in *Menstruation: A Cultural History*, ed. Andrew Shail and Gillian Howie (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 2. As cited in Morrison, 45. See also Margrit Shildrick, *Leaky Bodies and Boundaries: Feminism, Postmodernism and (Bio) Ethics* (London: Routledge, 1997).

⁴⁴ For a discussion of the origins of modern anxieties around the maternal body, see Clare Hanson, 'The Maternal Body,' in *The Cambridge Companion to the Body in Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 87-100.

⁴⁵ Elizabeth Grosz, *Space, Time and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies* (New York/London: Routledge, 1995), p. 32, qtd. in Morrison, p. 45.

⁴⁶ Maggie Nelson, *Women, The New York School, and Other True Abstractions* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2007), p. 122.

⁴⁷ Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (New York: Penguin, 1986), 259.

⁴⁸ Susan Strasser, *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1999), p. 210.

⁴⁹ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, transl. Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), pp. xix; 35-37.

⁵⁰ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, transl. George Weidenfield (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1966 [1962]), 17, 21, qtd. in de Certeau, 29-30.

⁵¹ Jean Baudrillard, 'The System of Collecting' in *The Cultures of Collecting*, ed. John Elsner and Roger Cardinal (London: Reaktion Books), pp. 7-24.

⁵² Cox, Rosie et. al. *Dirt: The Filthy Reality of Everyday Life*, Rosie Cox et al. (London: Profile Books, 2011), p. 37-74.

⁵³ Jessamyn Neuhaus provides an excellent analysis of the sheer repetitiveness of post-war advertising for domestic goods, highlighting the extent to which the industry relied on the same few tropes—housewives 'obsessed with shiny floors and gleaming toilet bowls; who often stood entranced by their clean, germ-free house or with their heads buried in a basket of laundry sniffing ecstatically' (p. 215)—even after the women's liberation movement began to gain pace (p. 132).

⁵⁴ There exists a wealth of scholarship on advertising's (and more broadly, late capitalism's) co-option of artistic techniques associated with the avant-garde. For a historical analysis of surrealism's co-option in American culture, see Sandra Zalman, *Consuming Surrealism in American Culture: dissident Modernism* (New York: Routledge, 2016). For a broader discussion of its co-option in late capitalism, see Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991) and Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, transl. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

⁵⁵ The film of *Diary of a Mad Housewife* was released in 1970; *Up the Sandbox!* was released in 1972; The TV films of *The Cracker Factory* and *The Women's Room* were released in 1979 and 1980 respectively (Loudermilk, 44-45).

* Rachele Dini is Lecturer in English Literature at the University of Roehampton, specialising in discard studies, literary avant-gardes, post-war American literature, and speculative fiction (particularly the work of J.G. Ballard). She is the author of *Consumerism, Waste, and Re-use in Twentieth-century Fiction: Legacies of the Avant-Garde* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), and is currently writing a book on time-saving domestic gadgets in Cold War American fiction.